

The Mystery of the Dead Man on the Davit.



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"ON MANY SEAS."

ever, that he—thinking from their number that he had only his own watch to deal with—would run forward by the weather gangway to go to his room for his pistol. Then the rest, who were concerned under the break of the poop, would receive him on deck.

How in the world did we manage to forget that he never ran from anybody?

There was no very great enthusiasm manifested when volunteers were called for to form the boarding party. I offered to head it, but it was admitted that I was too much battered to be serviceable. My example told, however, for soon the requisite number was found to undertake the desperate mission. Silently, and with a sharp eye on the mate, we gathered under the break of the poop. The moon was shining brightly, making our efforts at concealment all the more difficult. The three volunteers mounted the lee ladder and disappeared. We saw the man who was watching along the weather gangway step out from under cover and look inquiringly aft. Then there was a noise of blows and falling bodies, mingled with hurried curses and the patter of bare feet along the lee gangway.

As two of the boarding party breached clear of the ladder and tumbled over each other on the main deck the after bell was rung violently, and before we had time to wonder what the matter was, the captain, second mate and passengers burst through the forward cabin doors and fired into us as though we were a flock of sparrows. Paralyzed, we fled for our lives forward and into the forecabin, they after us, blazing away.

We closed the doors and secured them on the inside. They emptied their revolvers into the door and side of the house, and then, the captain, cursing us for a gang of jailbirds, they went aft. A count of noses showed us to be three men short, and we never saw either of them again. We now heard the report of those who went aft to "do up" the mate. When they had appeared at the after corner of the house he was standing with his back to them, looking away to windward. They armed the helmsman with an iron belaying pin, and, elated with their success so far, were in the very act of rushing on the mate when he turned. There was not much need to tell the rest.

Every one knew what had happened, then.

They fell before him like grain before the sickle. Two regained their feet and got away while he was giving what was no doubt, a preconcerted alarm. Hence the raking fire that we received on the main deck.

What was to be done now? Or, rather, what would they do? We were now reduced to seven able men, and they had lost a man. Two of our fellows were slightly wounded by pistol shots, while the others, we knew, were unharmed. I had hung on to my captain's hat, and it was the only weapon left to us, while they had the ship and everything in her, ourselves included.

The more we talked and thought of it the worse did our case appear. We secured the doors as best we could, and finally dropped off to sleep. The weather was fine, and so they left us all night, and the next day. We could hear them occasionally about the decks, and the smells from the galley tantalized us, for we had nothing to eat but hardtack, and as there was no water in the forecabin that was not available. We suffered torments from the suffocating heat and from thirst, but dared not show a nose outside our doors. The very fact that they allowed us to remain in there when they were simply able to batter down our doors and to as they liked with us afterward caused us much worry yet. What were they up to, anyway?

The long day drew to a close, we refrained from lighting our slush-lamp on account of the heat, and as sailors can sleep under almost any circumstances, we slept. Sometime during the night we were roused by the bark heeling suddenly and heavily to port. Immediately there was a sharp rat-tat-tat on the lee door, and we heard Skelly's voice shouting, "Come, git out here, git out, yer damned fools, do yer want ter be drowned?" A sudden sharp heel of the bark very near to the capsizing point warned us that he was right.

So we opened our door and tumbled out in time to hear, above the splashing of the sea, Captain Halliday coming at the mate: "Why in d—d don't ye git them d—d scoundrels o' your'n out here and a—me sail off o' this vessel. G—d

—a ye, ye're wuss'n they be yerself."

The old man was raving drunk. The bark was flat aback, the wind was howling through the rigging, and the rain and spray were driving across her in solid sheets. The mate yelled orders at us which we were unable to fulfil. We could hardly hang on, let alone work.

In the midst of all this 'hell afloat' there came a blinding flash of lightning.

I saw a fireball as big as a beef tierce go through the foremast just above the cap, but I heard no thunder. Nothing could be heard above the general din. Instead of falling over the side, the topmast flew away to leeward, rigging and backstays having no more effect in stopping it than so many parts of rotten sail twine.

It took the jibboom and maintopgallant-mast with it.

With the very next heave of the sea the maintopmast and mizenmast, eight feet from the deck, left her, and she rolled to windward a helpless hulk.

Her courses—old fine weather sails—had split and blown away before we came on deck.

Within half an hour the gale lulled so that orders could be heard and men could move about the decks. The captain ordered the mate to send three men to the pump, and take the rest, with the second mate and cook, to clear away the wreckage and get sail bent and set to steady her a bit. By midnight we had a reefed foresail set, and she was running before it, the passenger at the wheel.

The black cook helped the mates to drive us, and I heard the Captain tell the three men at the pump that if they didn't "keep that brake going," he would be "down there among 'em."

The mate went aft for something, and a yell from forward told that the cook had met his reward. Hearing that cry the mate ran forward again, and the second mate disappeared. Not a man was to be found about the decks. On his way around the house something washed against his legs, upsetting him. He grappled with it, and on dragging it to the rail was able to make out, by the long oilskin coat, that it was the captain. The features—there were none.

Things looked serious. He hurried to his room and got his revolver.

The three who had been pumping, after disposing of the Captain, had entered the cabin in search of refreshments, and true to their training, although they had been starving for a month, they looked for rum. There was plenty of that, and the first long, delicious swig so revived them, and warmed their hearts that they remembered their wet and hungry shipmates slaving out there under the mates and cook. A two-gallon jug, and several bottles made the passage from cabin to forecabin in safety. The word was passed among the crew forward and when the mate, swinging himself along by the water cask lashings, appeared at the forecabin door with his revolver, he faced seven Shanghai beachcombers with enough 'rot gut' aboard to feel dead ripe for anything, especially vengeance on him.

A bottle, flung from a dark corner of the forecabin, shattered on the butt of his revolver, cutting his hand and causing the weapon to drop from his grasp. Before he could recover it with his other hand the solitary hand-spike in possession of the forecabin party came down with a whizz and, just missing his head, broke his collar bone, to her intense satisfaction.

He was ours now. We leaped through the door, falling over one another in our eagerness to pay an installment of the endless debt we owed to Mr. Skelly. Wounded and outnumbered as he was, he managed to give many of us receipts in the shape of kicks and bites, and at last, but little satisfaction in that, or rather finding more attractions elsewhere, we trooped aft to where the unsuspecting passenger was steering and wishing for daylight. His first intimation that anything was wrong was when he was snatched from the wheel and dragged, kicked and beaten, down on to the main deck.

A small dinky lay inside the long boat, one that the captain had used for shore duty while on the coast. We quickly had her out, and threw her bodily over the rail, and then amid his prayers for mercy, we hove the passenger into her, and the second mate, whom we found skulking

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THE report of the discovery of the derelict schooner General Siglin in the North Pacific with the dead body of her mate lashed to a davit recalls vividly to my mind an ocean tragedy of forty years ago, which resulted in the finding of the Baltimore bark Black Hawk in a very similar condition.

The Black Hawk had been three years on the China coast, and as her bottom resembled a combination hay field and oyster bed while the pumps warned Captain Halliday that the torpedos were progressing finely in their efforts to convert her into a sieve, he collected such cargo as he could get—tea was beyond her—shipped a crew of Shanghai beach-combers, and sailed for Boston and a dry dock.

I had been left behind in the hospital when my own ship sailed, and as the Consul curiously informed me that Uncle Sam was not maintaining a free home for sick, lame and lazy sailors, I grasped the first opportunity that offered itself and shipped in the Black Hawk for home. Although I was a young fellow in those days, I had been at sea long enough to become thoroughly imbued with that hatred of everything afloat the mainland, which is such a strong characteristic of "Poor Jack."

There were ten of us forward—myself and nine typical Shanghai beach-combers, red-nosed, bleary-eyed, ragged scoundrels, whose ever present want was samshay, and whose proudest boast was that they sailed in any man's ship, and that the hotter she was the better they were suited. Captain Dane Halliday was a big, red-faced, foul-mouthed, perambulating rum barrel. Mr. Skelly, the mate, a long, lathy, stooping individual, impressed us as being suave, if not simple, and therein we erred.

The second mate, Mr. Cobb, was a young man of a rather obtrusively boisterous manner, whom we decided needed and would receive training before the bark's anchor stirred the mud of Boston harbor.

The cook, a burly Baltimore negro, not over polite, was regarded as a prospective candidate for sundry wholesome thumps, intended to impress him with a proper respect for his superiors. These, with a passenger, a young man of twenty-three or four, son of a Shanghai merchant, constituted the "after guards."

Our first morning at sea dawned bright and beautiful and showed the port watch sitting on their chests gazing dubiously into a "kid" of cracked hatch—a vile, greasy compound of pounded hardtack, coarsely chopped "salt horse" and slush, the whole mess bolted nearly to the consistency of glue, sure harbinger of scurvy, especially on such a long, tedious passage as any one could see that we were in for. Harry Jones, a big, bony Welshman, looked at the steaming "kid" a moment and said:

"That's fine! 'Usky-me-gush,' the first bloody mornin' out. 'Ow many of us 'll live ter see the land o' the free at this rate? I'm damned, but I 'ave a mind ter go haft an' 'arsh 'is Nibs ter let me bout, an' 'll walk back ter Shang'ai."

I was passing the door, when one of the watch called me to see the fine beefsteak and potatoes they were getting on board of my "bloody country ship." We were soon joined by a couple more of the watch on deck, and it was decided that right now was the best time to enter our protest.

Eight men—the entire watch below, and three of us on deck—marched aft in a body, Mr. Skelly, the easy-going mate, was lounging idly over the weather rail, his attitude listless and shambling as it always was. We went to him, and I being nearest called him by name and said: "We would like to see the captain." Without leaving the rail he turned his head lazily and said: "The hell you would! Went the commodore do ye?"

"Commodore or captain," said a bow-legged little Englishman, "we wants to see the man as 'bordered us fed on swill such as no decent 'or would 'eat, afore we're 'artly clear o' the land."

Our long, sun-dried, Irish-American mate straightened himself with a whip-like jerk, his mouth came open, and a torrent of

blasphemous, invective poured forth that held us spellbound in admiration, experts as we were. He kept it up for a full minute, while we stood there wondering where it all came from. Then he was among us, and, before we knew it, three men were sprawling senseless on the deck, and we had all been hit or kicked, or both, and were in full retreat forward. He was a "Bucko," and like all Bucko mates could just walk through twenty men like a dose of salts, and "lam hell out of them." The unwelcome food was eaten by both watches; it was admitted that the mate was a "horse," and dire vengeance was sworn against him.

From that day there was no peace. No afternoon watch below, no man was ever called by his correct name, or allowed to have his bumps and cuts all healed at once. The young passenger practised on us and the negro cook insulted us shamefully, shoving our kids of cracked hatch along the deck to us with "Here, hogs, take yer swill," and we took it, ate it to the last scrap and wished, oh, how we wished, that there was more of it.

There is a limit to the endurance of even a Shanghai beach-comber, and in this instance that limit was reached while they were yet alive.

The result of several clandestine forecabin councils was that every man of the ten swore on his sheath knife to take no more of the mate's "lip," and that the next time that a man was struck we would rise "en masse" and run the entire after-guard over the taffrail.

The last man had hardly subscribed to this oath when the door was snatched violently open and disclosed the mate's unhandsome visage. "Come out here, ye scoundrels of Chinese jills!" The epithet having been applied collectively, whose business was it to take it up? Also, the first and last man out forgot to resent the kicks and cuffs which they received according to time-honored custom.

I was at the wheel that night from 10 to 12. The wind was so light that she hardly had steerageway on her, yet every time the mate looked at the compass he would curse me for being off my course. He had a way of thumping the man at the wheel on the back of the head, causing him to bump himself severely on the spokes. He had already done it to me twice, and I swore to myself that if he did it again I would kill him. He did it. I let go the wheel and sprang at him, but before I could get my knife out he had me down on the main deck, kicked and pounded nearly to insensibility. My watch mates threw salt water over me until I was somewhat revived.

The first use I made of my voice when I was able to speak was to revile them for a set of cowardly hounds. They were full of excuses. It was so sudden. They had not been ready. One of the watch was aloft, rendering them short-handed, and so forth. "All right," said I, "I tackled him alone, and you two never offered help. Now I am going to call the watch below and have it out with him. We couldn't have a better chance. He's on deck alone, and if he can kick all hands, all right; but unless he can he's got to be licked to-night. I went stand 'em longer."

The starboard watch were not pleased to be called for such a job, I could see that; but I labored with them until I roused what little enthusiasm there was left in their starved and beaten bodies, and they finally agreed that now was as good a time as any. Silently we crept out of the lee door and armed ourselves with the bars of the forecabin capstan, marline spikes, windlass normans—anything. We held a final council of war under the lee of the house. Three men, carrying an extra weapon for the man at the wheel, were to creep along the lee gangway, and on reaching the after corner of the cabin were to rise to their feet and rush on him, assisted by the helmsman.

If he attempted to stand his ground they were to knock him on the head and drop him overboard. The supposition was, how-

"I Heard That the Black Hawk Had Been Boarded Soon After We Left Her, and That the Mate Was Found Tied to the Stump of the Mizzenmast, Dead, with the Food Alongside Him."